



Oral History  
of  
SELMA COHEN LITMAN

Marcie Cohen Ferris, Oral Historian

*Weaving Women's Words*

July 9, 2001

Baltimore, Maryland

This interview is part of the Nicki Newman Tanner Oral History Archive at the Jewish Women's Archive.

Citation Information – Please use the following format when citing this oral history.  
Oral History of Selma Litman, 2001 July 9. Brookline, Mass: Jewish Women's Archive. Retrieved from <http://XXX>, DATE.



Oral History of Selma Litman by the Jewish Women's Archive is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 3.0 United States License. Permissions beyond the scope of this license may be available at <http://jwa.org/contact>.

## PREFACE

The Jewish Women's Archive, a national non-profit organization founded in 1995, chronicles the stories, struggles, and achievements of Jewish women in North America.

Over the past century, Jewish women have made extraordinary cultural, political, intellectual, and religious contributions to our society. They have been the bearers of tradition and the forgers of new paths; they have shaped our lives, built our institutions, and nurtured our communities in ways both celebrated and unheralded. Yet their voices have too often been missing from the pages of history.

For *Weaving Women's Words*, the Jewish Women's Archive conducted oral histories with 60 Jewish women living in Baltimore and Seattle. Born in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, these women lived through decades of political, social, and economic upheaval, as well as dramatic changes in expectations for women and Jews. Doctors and lawyers, teachers and salesladies, politicians and government workers, homemakers and community volunteers, our narrators reflect the diverse range of backgrounds, affiliations, and choices made by Jewish women who grew up in the shadow of the Great Depression, the Second World War, the Holocaust, and the struggle for a Jewish state. Their life stories were the inspiration for exhibitions in Seattle and Baltimore that combined excerpts from the interviews, ethnographic portraits by photographer Joan Roth, and works of contemporary art in a variety of media.

The *Weaving Women's Words* oral history project was made possible in part by major grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Brenda Brown Lipitz Rever Foundation, and the Jacob and Hilda Blaustein Foundation, Inc.



FERRIS: Let me make sure—

LITMAN: Did you have a good trip over?

MF: Okay, I'll make a quick announcement.

SL: Go ahead.

MF: Today I'm here—it is July the 9<sup>th</sup>, 2001. My name is Marcie Cohen Ferris. I'm with Selma Litman. Right? Or is—am I pronouncing that right?

SL: It's Selma Cohen Litman.

MF: Selma Cohen Litman.

SL: Right.

MF: And we're here doing a "Weaving Women's Words" interview for the Jewish Women's Archive and I really thank you for your time and for your participation in this.

SL: And I thank you for choosing me.

MF: Oh, that was easy.

SL: [laughs]

MF: And, you know, I was so amazed by just looking at your—the pre-interview form, because you remember so much.

SL: I do. I do. I have total recall, except what happened yesterday; I have no idea. [chuckles]

MF: That's okay. We won't worry about yesterday. All right, so let me have you say your name and when you were born and just talk a little bit about the early origins of your family.

SL: Okay.

MF: I think that's a good way to get going.

SL: My name now?

MF: Mm-hmm.

SL: My name is Selma Litman and I was born on April 1, 1917. That should give you a clue about me. And I was born in Baltimore at the corner of Baltimore and Exeter Streets to parents who had migrated from Russia. My mother came from a place called [several words unclear].

MF: Can you spell that?

SL: I can't but I do know that—I really don't know how to spell it, but I do know that actually it was Hughesville—H-u-g-h-e-s-v-i-l-l-e, because a Mr. Hughes from England was the governor. And my father came (and I'm not going to be able to spell this either) from Simferopol in Russia, which was on the Black Sea. And I understand it's known as the "Bermuda of Russia." My closest—

MF: Just give me their names—your mother and—

SL: My mother's name was Goldie Omansky—O-m-a-n-s-k-y. My father's name was David Cohen—C-o-h-e-n. They were married in Russia and my oldest sister was born there. My father came to the United States right before the Baltimore fire, which was sometime in 1904. My father followed him, arrived in 1906.

MF: And who came in 1904?

SL: Pardon me?

MF: Who came in 1904?

SL: My father.

MF: And then who came in 1906?

SL: My mother.

MF: Okay. And what brought him to Baltimore?

SL: She came—she came into Baltimore. She didn't land in—

MF: What about your father? What was—

SL: He came to Baltimore also. When he left Russia he intended to go to France, and he went there. My father graduated, which was unique for a Jewish man, from engineering school in Russia. And he was an engineer there. But at that time they were ready for him to come and serve and my grandfather—this was also unique—my mother's father—was a landowner in Russia. That was very unique and he had a granary at the railroad station. The guard at the railroad station came to my grandfather's house and he said, "Is your son-in-law here?" My grandfather said, "Yes." He says, "Well, we have his marching papers." So my grandfather put him in the wagon and took him to wherever

he took him. I'm not sure. His—I'm not sure where he left from—you know, where he—but he sailed to France. And then my mother got a letter from him saying that he felt he would never make a living in France. And he had an aunt who lived in Baltimore and that he was going to come to America.

MF: Do you know why—the problem with France? Was it anti-Semitism or—

SL: No, but—I mean, listen, I do know that an engineer—a Jewish engineer was not hired in America either.

MF: Right.

SL: So I really have no idea. This is 1904, so you know it was many years before I was born. The stories I tell you were repeated to me daily by my mother, because I was—I mean, you know, I was the only thing she could hold on to and tell it to. Now, my oldest sister, I said, was born in Russia.

MF: What was her name?

SL: Her name was Anne.

MF: A-n-n-e?

SL: A-n—well, her name was [unclear], so it was Anna Pearl—Anna Pearl Cohen. She had many—Laborwit, Richter. Anyhow, when my mother—my sister—she was born in Russia. My father left when she was just an infant and I have to assume that she and my mother stayed with her parents after my father left. I assume that because I never asked the question and I don't remember. But my mother did tell me they did not live—well, I guess nothing was predominantly Jewish—but I think that they lived in a predominantly Christian area. And she—my mother does remember when the pogroms came the neighbors came and got them and led them across the land into their home and safety. Now, my mother came in 1906 around Passover and my sister's favorite story was that nine months later her brother was born. When my mother came here my father went down to pick her up. And he said to her, "The clothes I have on are borrowed and a taxi is x number of dollars and a street"—she said, "Take me anywhere you want to take me, but let's get out of here." And he took her to his aunt's house. My father worked as a presser.

That was his first job, and he told my mother that his children would not grow up with a father for a presser. So he went on to law school and his dean suggested to him that he take the bar before he graduated from law school, which is what he did. And he passed the bar in 1916 and he died in 1918 from the flu. So I absolutely did not know my father, but I imagine I did, because my mother told me so many times the same story that I believe that I knew those stories.

MF: How old was he when he died?

SL: Thirty-six and I was, like, 19 months old. Now, my brother—my oldest sister was 12 years older than I. He was 10 years older than I and the next sister was eight years older than I, so my closest sibling was eight years.

MF: So give me that listing of your siblings for—

SL: Okay, Aaron was the second child. Now, he was born in 1907. My mother came in 1906—April and he was born January, 1907. And the other sister, whose name was Belle, was born in 1909. Yeah, and she was eight years older than I. And my oldest sister—her greatest joy was to tell that—she went to Eastern High School, which was in East Baltimore, and she used to walk to my father's office, which was on St. Paul Street, I believe, and the secretary let her use the typewriter. That was the greatest joy. But she was a very unique person because when she graduated from high school she encouraged my brother to leave school and get a job and go to school at night, and the two of them, as young as they were, bought a house and paid the mortgage. Is that unique? That really is unique.

MF: I never heard anything like that.

SL: And she really—she really was a unique person. She—all of them were.

MF: Was Anne working?

SL: Anne was working. Anne had a job. She worked for a real estate firm. You're not a Baltimorean so you wouldn't know these names, so there's no point in talking about them.

MF: It's okay.



SL: It's okay. Well, she did work for David Chertkof—C-h-e-r-t-k-o-f, who was—

MF: Could you spell that one more time?

SL: C-h-e-r-t-k-o-f. And Aaron got a job with his boyfriend's father. The firm name was Dashew—D-a-s-h-e-w. And he went to school at night and he graduated from high school.

MF: And what was your mom doing during this time when—

SL: She was just taking care of the children—what—you know, my mother's favorite story was she was Miss Neatnik, so my father brought over all of her family. Now, I want to say that his mother—my father's mother died when he was about two years old, and his father did—which was very ordinary—he married her younger sister. And so—but his father died sometime early—I mean, like before I was born, I know. But he did bring over my mother's mother, father, and all of her siblings—brought them to this country. And as a presser he earned \$12 a week. I don't know how he did all these things.

MF: Me neither.

SL: But whatever, \$12 was, I guess, maybe more like a hundred, right? He was a unique guy, my father.

MF: Yeah.

SL: He was the first lawyer for the International Lady Garment Worker's Union. I think he saw that—I think I told Froma that. Right?

MF: Yeah, amazing.

SL: And the other things that's amazing is Woodrow Wilson got in touch with him and wanted him to go along with him to Versailles for the Peace Treaty to be an interpreter. And my mother said, no, she didn't want him to go because anything could happen. You know, they had visions of the czar—whatever—I guess they did. And first of all, he died before it happened. You know, he died in—he was sick. He had the flu. He got well and he came home from the office and he said to my mother, "Please awaken me." Now, these are all stories that my mother told me. "Please awaken me because I have to go to a Building and Loan Association Meeting." So she went in and she awakened

him and he said, "I don't think I can go." That was on a Thursday and on a Friday she called the doctor, and on a Saturday they called the professor—you know, the specialist. And on Sunday he was buried. And my sister, Belle, and I both had the flu at that time but my mother had a nurse in the house who was taking care of us.

MF: Where is he buried?

SL: He's buried in Workmen's Circle and the tombstone was a gift of the Bar Association. And as a matter of fact, when I graduated from high school—was 1934—difficult times in this country, so my brother suggested to me that I go to the union and ask for a job. And I'll show you the picture; it's in the back. And I walked in. I saw my picture—my father's picture hanging on the wall. I was amazed; I truly was amazed. But I do want to tell you that he was a man who was very much loved because I have the letters written by the dean of University of Maryland Law School and by the president of his class sending their condolences to my mother.

MF: Well, tell me a little bit about your memories of—the first memories you have of neighborhood.

SL: Well, I told you I was born in Baltimore on Exeter Street and—

MF: What was—

SL: —my—

MF: What was that neighborhood like?

SL: Well, see, I really—I was—I told you, I was like about 19 months old. I truly don't remember.

MF: Your first memories of—

SL: Any neighborhood. Well, I'm going to just tell you.

MF: Okay.

SL: So, it was suggested by my father's friends that my mother should open a confectionery store, because she truly had no business knowledge or whatever. And she had four children to raise. And my father's friends, before they went to work in the morning, used to come and help her get the store set

up for the day. Well, that didn't go too well, so someone suggested that she open a grocery store, and that was on Greenmount Avenue. Now, I do have a recollection of that neighborhood.

MF: Is that Greenmount?

SL: Greenmount Avenue.

MF: Two words?

SL: Like—let me see. I don't really—I don't really know.

MF: It's okay.

SL: And then they suggested that she go to Washington and open her store, whatever it was. So I really don't—really know because if it—we were on Greenmount Avenue my mother didn't let me out of the house. That could be sure. You know? And in Washington I'm sure she didn't let me out of the house. But I went—then they moved on Baltimore Street and I went to the first grade on Baltimore Street. I still really remember the inside of the house, but—in other words, I'm going to tell you that I didn't have any friends of my age, you know?

MF: What do you remember about the inside of the house?

SL: The inside of the house—it was an apartment and—oh, I want to tell you something that I told Dana yesterday. When we lived on Greenmount Avenue there was a grocery store—you know, my mother's grocery store and then you walked up about five or six steps and there was the kitchen. And this I have a complete memory of. But I know they repeated this a million times. I have a picture of my brother sitting and reading the Sunday paper, and suddenly my sister Belle—terrible scream. And Aaron never let the paper down but he said, "Don't scream so loud. Mom will get scared." She burned herself. She had first-degree burns. He's telling her, "Don't scream so loud." Whatever—I do have—then the other thing I want to say about my sister, Belle, is in this house on Greenmount Avenue—then you walked up the steps and there was a dining room upstairs. And there was a—the word is not bureau. I can't think of it right now. You know?

MF: Buffet?

SL: Thank you. A buffet, and my mother used to have a scarf on the buffet and whatever she had on the buffet. Belle walked in her sleep. She used to get up, go in the dining room, take the things off the buffet and the scarf and hang it over a chair. And [chuckles] I was scared to death that something would happen to her because that was right along side of the steps. That's all I remember. There were no childhood friends and, like I tell you, I went to the first grade. And then we moved into this house, which was on Garrison Avenue—G-a-r-r-i-s-o-n Avenue and there I met school friends. Now, this was a predominantly Christian neighborhood, and my best friend was a little Catholic girl. I used to hear her catechism and I don't know what she—and I went to school there until the sixth grade. And in those days some people did go to junior high and I was one chosen to go to junior high. And I went to—

MF: Do you have any grade school memories?

SL: Yes. I mean—particular memories. Yeah, I have one horrible memory. When I was in the second grade the teacher, who was really mean—I heard someone whisper or something—and the class would not report who it was who had done that. So she said, "Well, then you'll just stay here until"—this was terrible. I mean, you know, to do this to a little six-year-old—"You'll just stay here until you tell me and I'm leaving." And she went outside—you know, in today's world what they would do to her? And locked the door. And we were all in there petrified—just petrified. Maybe she was only gone a second; I have no idea. But it seemed like an eternity to me so it must have to everybody else. And then she came back and unlocked the door. And she says, "I've changed my mind. I'm going to let the principal deal with"—or whatever the hell she said. I don't know what she said. But in those days you were extremely obedient and you didn't go home and tell your mother that that happened because there wasn't anything that was going to change it. But I did come from a modern school in the fact that it had—as a matter of

fact, it's still in operation. [phone ringing] Do you think Harry's going to get that? I certainly hope so. Excuse me.

MF: Okay. He got it.

SL: I presume he did. It had a gymnasium in—and we had dramatic—that was my outstanding thing in school—dramatics. I loved belonging to the thing and being chosen for the star of the show, you know. And in those days they also had something in Baltimore where many schools participated and met at the Armory and, you know, had a big show or the Lyric or, you know, someplace where they could put on a performance. And I remember that I was once a firefly and you had a black costume and a flashlight and you ran around stage. [chuckles] I have wonderful memories of school, when I finally met, you know, people. And then when I went to school (it was called 223) I met Jewish friends.

MF: Was that in junior high?

SL: No, that was elementary school. And then junior high my oldest sister, Anne, insisted that she didn't want me to take the academic course. She wanted me to take the commercial course, so I could get a job. So I had to go to a school which was downtown and I bet you I rode for an hour or better on the streetcar to go to that school. And when I got there the gymnasium was a classroom. You see, it was all different. And I came home from school that day crying and I told my mother I was going to quit school because it was all Italian people and, anyhow, they had a discussion. They decided I could go to another junior high school, which was called 49, which was an accelerated school. Both of them were. And when I got to high school they had something called a mixed course. You could take the academic course and take shorthand and typing. They were not my cup of tea but I did that. And then when I was graduated my brother—see, my brother always came to my defense. Whatever I was—if I'd have a birthday party—like I was 12 years old, I'd have a birthday party. We would play bridge. My sister would say, "What the hell they going to do when they grow up?" Anne says, "They'll find

something to do. Don't worry—don't worry about it." She was a wonderful, bright, caring person but had assumed too many responsibilities very early in life. And—but I want you to know that the four of us had a wonderful rapport with each other and enjoyed each other.

MF: Yeah, it really sounds like it.

SL: It was beautiful. I do remember saying to them once, "Can you help me with this homework?" And they said, "Nobody helped us." "Well, I won't ask you again!" [chuckles]

MF: What do you remember about, like, your social activities when you were in elementary and then in junior high?

SL: Elementary I don't remember social activities, but in junior high—in high school—let me say high school because I was probably one of the youngest people in my class. So in high school when I got there I was dressed like—let's see, in 1929—1929—17—I was like 12 years old when I got to the second year high school. And my mother sent me to school in Mary Jane pumps and such. And I got there, that's not how people in my class were dressed, you know. I had a hard time convincing my mother otherwise. But I have to say that I enjoyed life because I guess I was socially acceptable and I enjoyed—and I—this is a strange thing to say to you, but I've repeated this before—I never felt inferior to anybody. I felt on a par. I could do anything anybody else could do if I made the effort to do it, and I enjoyed—I was fortunate in that I was invited to many wonderful places and enjoyed them all.

MF: What kind of activities in high school did you participate in?

SL: Again, drama. I was no athlete. I used to hide when in those days you had to take a shower—I used to hide. I didn't want to get undressed and take a shower and I didn't want to jump off a horse. I don't want to do those things. That wasn't my cup of tea.

MF: Right.

SL: And—

MF: Can you remember—what would a typical day be like in high school? What time—kind of walk me through a day. Like, what time did you [unclear]?

SL: Okay, we get up in the morning at—by the time I was in high school we moved out of that—and we moved to an area that was called—it was near Druid Hill Park, which was predominantly Jewish. And there I met many good friends who were Jewish and remain—and every Friday night we would all meet outside the drugstore and talk to each other, and walk around the lake and go to movies—whatever it was. I enjoyed a wonderful social life in a Jewish area and walked to school—junior high school—used to walk to school with the kids in the neighborhood and very often we would walk home from school. We went to high school—it wasn't that much further but in those days you got a cab for 25 cents. Four of us would get in a cab and go to school. I hated riding the bus or whatever.

MF: When you got up in the morning did your mother wake you up and—

SL: No, I got up and got dressed and never was a breakfast eater. I would take a sip of milk and a bite of a cookie and my mother packed a lunch because I didn't eat anything that wasn't kosher in those days. And later on in life I rationalized that they cut this cheese sandwich with the same knife that they cut the ham sandwich, so I might as well taste the ham, you know. But fortunately, I had the good taste to continue to keep kosher in my home, and my children do 'til today. They do, which is unique in today's world.

MF: And—

SL: In high school I joined a sorority. I—

MF: Was it a Jewish sorority?

SL: It was a Jewish sorority.

MF: What was it—do you remember what it was called?

SL: Sigma Lambda Tau—S-i-g-m-a L-a-m-b-d-a T-a-u. And I'm friends with the ones still living 'til today. First of all, you kept friends in those days. First of all, you made friends. That—I know you have to be a friend to have a friend. But whatever, I had lots of good friends and our sorority did a lot of

philanthropic work. We used to at different holidays, in those days—and that's a long time ago; you know that—we used to collect food at the different holiday. And the young men we knew would drive us around and we'd drop it off. We'd get addresses from—I mean, not just in the neighborhood where we lived. The neighborhood where I lived, the people didn't need donations. It was a—during the beginning of the war—I got married in 1941. So, like from '38 to '41 the horror stories that we would hear, we would not believe them. We didn't. But I lived in a neighborhood; there were a lot of German Jews. And you would walk down the street, you'd think you were in Germany because they brought their relatives over early, you know. And you walked down the street and you heard that.

MF: This was in the Druid Hill area?

SL: Exactly. Yes, it was called—I grew up on Whitelock Street and—the corner of Whitelock and Brookfield and it was—you know, on Lake Drive there was a family by the name of Shapiro—extremely wealthy people. And next door was Hendler, the ice cream man. It was a wealthy neighborhood.

MF: How was your family supporting itself at that—

SL: At that point the four of us were—well, when I got out of high school, then I got a job. My mother was not a—she—her famous story was that when her father—when our father picked her up—first of all, her first famous story was that he embraced her and my sister, Anne, got upset. So Mama said to her, "This is Papa." She says, "No, Papa's in the trunk," because Mama must have had a picture of Papa in the trunk, and that was Papa, you know—whatever it was. I don't know how she brought all those things in the trunk.

MF: Yeah.

SL: I don't know how she brought—we have the trunk. My son has the trunk and I've distributed a lot of her things, like one of her pair of candlesticks Dana has. And my sister, Anne, had a daughter, Donna Mae. She has a pair of candlesticks. I have a—see that brass thing right up there?

MF: Uh-huh.



SL: Okay, Mama brought that and I always at Pesach time had it on the table filled with nuts. I have the becher that my mother and father used.

MF: What's that, Selma?

SL: My grandmother—the cup that you drink wine out of.

MF: How do you spell that?

SL: B-e-c-h-e-r. [goes to get glasses] There were two of them. My grandmother and grandfather used this to drink the wine at their wedding.

MF: Oh, it's wonderful. So, describe that. It's like a—

SL: A barrel.

MF: A little glass—

SL: A glass barrel. [goes to get photographs] This is my mother.

MF: Wow!

SL: And this is my father.

MF: Wonderful photographs.

SL: This was done in Russia.

MF: Love those. [long pause]

SL: But anybody who knew him loved him. Now, maybe in my eyes that's how it was but they all remembered him. As a matter of fact, there's an article written by [unclear], who is a—you know, talking about my father and, you know, how he was part of organization and—

MF: Tell me one more time what you said about the aliyah because I didn't catch that. I want to make sure we got that.

SL: That he was offered an aliyah in shul and he said, "I do not deserve it because I work on Shabbos."

MF: So what was your mama's style at home like? What kind of homemaker was she?

SL: She was a homemaker. She was an excellent cook. She was—she was a homemaker. She was not a businesswoman. When she came to this country, this was a man who was earning—I don't know if he was earning \$12 a week or \$10 a week when she came here. I can't tell you that. All I know is

that at one point in time he was earning \$12 a week. She told him that she'd do anything to help him but she couldn't wash clothes. Now, this man got her a maid to wash the clothes. He—you know, that's unique. And this was a black lady who used to come and my mother never saw any black people until she came to this country. So Mama would put a pillow on a rocking chair and that was where—that baby could have killed itself on a rocking chair [chuckles]—whatever it was. She wasn't going to let that baby sleep in her child's bed, you know—whatever it was. She was a wonderful woman with a—I'm going to tell you what. Mama lived to be 99 and she was in a facility against my wishes. But anyhow—but I used to go there at eleven o'clock and see to it that she had a shower, take her in, see to it that she had a shower and change her clothes everyday and help her with her lunch. My brother came at one o'clock and stayed 'til three. Anne came at three o'clock and stayed 'til five. Bill came at five o'clock and stayed 'til seven. And she had a roommate and this roommate happened to have been a concert pianist in Germany, you know. She said to her daughter, "I don't know. Mrs. Cohen's children are here with her all day long and nobody is with me." And the girl said to her, "Mama, Mrs. Cohen has four children. I'm only one person." So she was—we got the message from our father and they gave it to me that you have to take care of Mama. You know, whatever.

MF: What kind of food memories do you have?

SL: All the same ones that I make today.

MF: Tell me some of those.

SL: That—my mother made borscht—cabbage borscht. Hot cabbage borscht. That's a Russian dish. And she made meatballs rolled in cabbage. First of all, my mother—and I think all Jewish women did—took a chicken and made 12 different dishes out of it, you know. You made the soup and then you roasted the chicken and you chopped the liver. And you made—there was a neck. You don't see it today on a chicken. They took that skin and they stuffed it

with flour and pepper and sewed it up and roasted it with the chicken. And you—I'm telling you, 12 different dishes.

MF: Do you remember what that was called? Is there a name for that?

SL: I have—you mean the heldzel? The—

MF: Ya.

SL: That was called the heldzel.

MF: How do you spell that?

SL: H-e-l-d-z-e-l. Heldzel.

MF: So what do you remember like—that she would cook at—for your suppertime meal?

SL: Okay.

MF: When you'd come home from school what kind of things would you have?

SL: Oh, well, when you came home from school on Tuesday you had fried fish and blintzes—didn't have meat at the beginning of the week. The soup and the chicken and the noodles and the—and let me tell you that they made their own noodles. I can see her rolling the dough. I haven't got it here because a couple of years ago the children decided—I wasn't feeling too well and they decided that I wasn't to make things anymore. But Mama's recipes were things like you take the green bowl and you'd fill it with flour, or the yellow bowl, you fill it with flour and take a three-cent piece of yeast. So I once went to a bakery and she says, "From what year?" [chuckles] A three-cent—from what year? Anyhow. And Mama made wonderful things called piroshkis, which was dough and cheese. But, I mean, you could put other things in but hers was always cheese. And—

MF: That's—how do you spell that? Do you remember?

SL: Pir—

MF: P-i-e-r-o—

SL: I've got it spelled over here someplace. Let me see.

MF: That's okay. We'll get it later.

SL: Oh, okay.

MF: And what would you have for, like—do you remember any other supper meals? Fish one night—

SL: Well, fish, that was that night—fish and borscht.

MF: Borscht?

SL: Cold borscht. Okay. And hamburgers but they were called cottletten. They were—you know, they were chopped. You chopped your own meat. I want you to know that. And as a matter of fact, when I got married I said to my mother that I can take the fish in—or where I buy the fish I can have them—“Oh,” she says. “You would lose too much fish. No, you have to bring it home. You have to chop it by hand.”

MF: What did you call the hamburgers?

SL: Cottletten—c-o-t-t-l-e-t-t-e-n.

MF: That’s just a Yiddish or Russian—

SL: Russian. I think it was all Russian. I want to tell you that—I did tell you that she did live in an area where there were too many Christians. When my mother came to this country she didn’t speak Yiddish. She only spoke Russian. And my sister, Anne, didn’t speak anything but Russian until she was in the first grade. And my father says, “You’re in a country where Russian is not the acceptable language. You learn to speak.”—Mama spoke a very good English. She truly did. She didn’t go to school. She said—she said that when her mother came here—she said, “You know, I don’t understand you. You only have”—it depends on—it was before I was born so she’d say, three children—whatever, but—“and you’re busy all day long everyday. I had seven children and”—so my mother said to her, “Mama, you also had seven maids.” So, you know, there was a different—my father used to take his mother-in-law and his children and go to Tolchester and Mama stayed home to clean.

MF: What’s Tolchester?

SL: It was a resort. You went there by boat and spent the day.

MF: How do you spell that?

SL: T-o-l-c-h-e-s-t-e-r.

MF: Where was it?

SL: It's on the Chesapeake—let me ask Harry.

MF: Like, Eastern Shore?

SL: No, not that far. Let me ask Harry. Let me ask. [unclear] Eastern Shore  
[unclear] was it on the Chesapeake Bay?

[end of side 1, tape 1]

SL: This is my father when he was graduated from the law school and this is him sitting at his desk.

MF: So impressive! He's so young.

SL: Yeah.

MF: Amazing.

SL: It is. It is.

MF: Yeah. So good you have these pictures.

SL: Oh, yeah. I've got a million pictures.

MF: Yeah.

SL: As a matter of fact, Dana Lee just celebrated her 60<sup>th</sup> birthday. So my grandsons called me for pictures. The youngest one took one of the pictures of her when she was about five months old and put it on a shirt—a T-shirt that she—when she got it she was so excited and wore it. And the oldest one who hosted the party for her had a picture blown up and put on the birthday cake.

MF: That's great.

SL: I have great grandchildren—don't believe me! [walking to get photos] Are you the young lady who interviewed Min Shavitz?

MF: Yes.

SL: Okay, let me tell you. Should have asked Min about my mother. When Min got married and her first daughter was born, we lived in the same apartment

building. And Min was from Georgia and lonesome for her family. And her first daughter was not too well. So you used to carry her around on a pillow, and Mama used to tell her, "Bring her upstairs. I'll take care of her. You go out with your friends and enjoy yourself." Until today, she'll ask anybody—she'll tell anybody who will listen what a wonderful person my mother was. And what I started to tell you was when she was in this place—I can't call it by name because I always hated the fact.

MF: Yeah.

SL: But I know today that my siblings were not wrong. Number one—number one, I had help at home but she wouldn't let them touch her.

MF: Oh.

SL: And number two—well, it wasn't for Mama, but I insisted that she do the thing, if she would have had the energy to partake in what was offered, instead of sitting and looking at four walls. You see, I could never go into the front door in that place because I would see those people just sitting there waiting to die is how I felt about it. But anyhow, someone came to visit her when she was 99 years old. And they said to her, "Mrs. Cohen, do you know who I am?" She said, "Don't you know who you are?" So I want you to know she had a sense of humor to the end. She really did.

MF: Now, was she a baker too? Did she bake?

SL: Oh, yes. Are you kidding me?

MF: What kinds of things do you remember?

SL: Oh, my! First of all, she made wonderful doughnuts and my sisters would say, "Sure, you're making doughnuts. Aaron is coming." [chuckles] You know, that kind of thing. That—to show you that they were normal people. And she baked wonderful cookies—all kind of cookies. I got—she'd have a layer of dough and sugar and cinnamon and nuts, and like four layers of dough with that all between it. And she'd make sugar cookies and she'd make little cookies about this big with an almond in the center. She was—

Pesach is the time she made cakes. She didn't make cakes too much during the [unclear]. Pies—marvelous pies.

MF: Really?

SL: Oh, marvelous pies! She made pies with not the piecrust that you eat but like a cookie crust. That's the kind of pie and then on top, always, everything had sugar and cinnamon sprinkled on the top.

MF: Did she ever cook anything that was more of this area?

SL: No, absolutely not.

MF: It was always the—

SL: It was always the traditional thing that she brought in her mind from Russia. She—you know, she'd make a brisket.

MF: And, Selma, did she always have African American help?

SL: Yeah. Well, I mean, yes. Okay.

MF: Like housekeepers?

SL: Well, not a housekeeper. As I said, one day a week or something, you know.

MF: But nobody that cooked.

SL: No. No. Are you kidding me? She wasn't going to let them touch her pots. Oh, no! No. And the pot—I want to tell you—you're not going to believe this but I'm going to show you. I'm going to show you, when I was a little girl I had a terrible case of poison ivy. Now, I'm talking—I'm talking about 78 years ago. All right? And you used to get—we used to get ice delivered and you'd put a sign in the window how much you wanted—a 15-cent piece—never got a 15-cent piece but—do you ever remember seeing an icebox? Okay, then you know you had to empty the pan from under—okay. All right. This is what I'm talking about when we lived on Garrison Avenue. So, she took a hunk of ice and put it in a pot and went through the bottom of the pot with the ice pick and put the ice—put the pot outside to throw in the trash. The next-door neighbor—it was a Christian family—picked up the pot and put a nut and bolt in—I'm going to show you. [chuckles]

MF: Can I help you?

SL: No.

MF: It's a great looking pot.

SL: Do you believe it? That was Mama's pot that she cooked borscht in.

MF: Beautiful! Let's leave it out; we'll take a picture of it.

SL: Okay. Is that fantastic?

MF: I love it.

SL: With the nut and bolt?

MF: Yeah, I love it.

SL: Is that something?

MF: Yeah, it's so shiny.

SL: I use it 'til today.

MF: Great pot.

SL: I make good pea soup in this pot. Now, my siblings all loved the cabbage borscht and all of my life I always had the immediate world at my house for dinner on every holiday. And they loved cabbage and they all died within a very short time of each other. I just can't make it. Now, Harry loves that borscht, but I just can't make it.

MF: Too many memories tied up with that?

SL: That's Baba's pot.

MF: Are there just too many memories tied up with that recipe, Selma?

SL: No, but I'm enjoying it so much and I can't bring myself to want to make it.

MF: Yeah.

SL: But I do have to tell you. Baba made something called—we named it "cholesterol balls" [chuckles]—you—because it's—when you hear it you'll go crazy. You roll the dough. Oh, I started to tell you that my father had a board made and it had the sides built up, and Baba's recipe said that you had to roll the dough from edge to edge. Okay? So when—

MF: To make noodles?

SL: No, for anything. Anything that you rolled the dough. And the cholesterol balls were one of the things. One side was marked meat and the other—you



know, dairy. So our son's wife said, "Mom, you're not going to make anymore," you know—so but I have to have—and see, I bet you never saw a rolling pin. Oh, I gave it to her. It's a rolling pin. It's like a—

MF: Yeah.

SL: —a shoe, you know. Okay. So, I gave her the rolling pin and I gave her that board, and she has the board and she has the board, and I'm not going to ask for it back. Here we are. This is—

MF: Did you call her Mama or—

SL: No, I called her Mama and never Dad because they always referred to him as Papa.

MF: Yeah.

SL: And this is our son's wife. This is Honey and this is the yellow bowl and I went there. I go there to help her make piroshkes.

MF: Great.

SL: Whatever it is she makes.

MF: That's great.

SL: Isn't it?

MF: Yeah. Yeah. Ya, it's wonderful.

SL: And this we found the other day.

MF: Now, Selma, how did you make that cabbage soup? Was it—it wasn't like a beet borscht; it was a cabbage borscht. Right?

SL: Cabbage and beets and meat and never lemons, sour salt. You see, and I still do it until today. As a matter of fact, I was—Dana Lee lives in Connecticut but they also bought a place in Sarasota. So I was down there for Passover. I stay here for the seder and then I go down. It's not fair to leave Jeffrey here. I have two wonderful children. I really am blessed. I really am blessed. I have two wonderful children.

MF: Sit down.

SL: How about Baba's pot?

MF: So, on the weekends for Shabbat, how would your mom prepare for—the food for the Shabbat?

SL: Well, it was always gefilte fish and soup with noodles. She made matzoh balls Pesach time, not all year round. You know.

MF: So, what would you have on a typical Friday night?

SL: I'm telling you. Gefilte fish and—

MF: Do you know what kind of fish she used?

SL: Yeah, rock and whitefish, and Mama used shad.

MF: In her gefilte fish?

SL: Yeah. And that was another thing. At Pesach she made baked shad all the time. But I have to tell you about the cholesterol balls.

MF: Okay. [chuckles]

SL: So you rolled this dough out to, you know, and then—hold on to your drawers and earrings—you smeared schmaltz over the whole thing and sugar and cinnamon. And then you rolled it up. It was a roll about this big. And you cut it into pieces and you put schmaltz in a casserole and you put them in and make sure that they were submerged, or partially submerged. And you baked it. That crust—and my brother's son, whose name is David Cohen—now, typically we named each one of our children after our father—and he always says to me, "Aunt Selma, when are you making cholesterol balls?" Now, I did make them through the years and then everybody came up with this cholesterol problem but I—that—it was all heredity. My niece, Donna Askin, worked in a hematology lab and found that she had a cholesterol count of like 600. And—

MF: So, tell me again about Shabbat. You'd have the gefilte fish.

SL: Gefilte fish and chicken soup and chopped liver. I mean, I don't know when you ate the chopped liver, before or after or during. And roasted chicken and browned potatoes or kasha. You know what kasha is? Okay. Or kasha. Now, I don't remember Mama ever making any green vegetables. She made a salad, which was tomatoes and green peppers chopped up in small

pieces—you know, about the size of Israeli Salad pieces—and, like, mayonnaise and mustard dressing. I swear, I don't remember her cooking any green vegetables. Peas. Peas is the only thing and lima beans.

MF: Would you have a dessert on Shabbat?

SL: Always had a dessert. First of all, compote was the number one dessert and cookies, or a wonderful apple pie or a peach pie. That was Mama's best thing, a peach pie. But that was only when you could get fresh peaches. She didn't—I don't think she ever used any canned goods, except maybe peas. Maybe that was it. Peas.

MF: Where did she get her vegetables and fruits?

SL: Well, when you lived on Whitelock Street there was a grocery store down the street and they had—and there was a kosher butcher down the street.

MF: What about bread?

SL: And there was a baker. That was where I went to Miss Annie and said, "Give me a three-cent piece of yeast." And she says, "From what year?"

MF: Kosher bakery?

SL: Yeah.

MF: Do you remember what it was called?

SL: Miss Annie's—no, it wasn't called Miss Annie's. [Selma later remembered it was called Whitelock Bakery.] I don't know.

MF: It wasn't like a Silber's, was it?

SL: Oh, no. No. Later years I went to Silber's. In later years I would go to a kosher—I would call the kosher butcher and I would say, "And do me a favor. Go down to Silber's and get me a challah and whatever else I want." They would go down and add it on to my bill. I was pampered.

MF: What do you remember about holidays when you were growing up—about the Jewish holidays?

SL: The holidays—I—what I remember was from the time I was about 11 years old, because that's when I moved to Whitelock Street and, you know. When I lived on Garrison Avenue there was a shul on Denmore Avenue. But I guess I

would sometimes go there. I don't know because, in—really, in Garrison Avenue I didn't have any—there were Jewish children, but like they were older than I or younger than I. And my big friend was Isabelle Morrison. Now, I wouldn't go into a church. You know, you're supposed to hold your breath if you see a nun, because I don't know—

MF: Was she the Catholic friend?

SL: Yes, yes.

MF: All right. So, let's, I guess, get back up into high school. You started dating Harry.

SL: When I was 15 and he was 16.

MF: What would you do on a date?

SL: Well, in those days you went to a dance. You didn't go to movies because you weren't spending time, and there were a lot of organizations that had dances at a hall called CADOA Hall.

MF: How do you spell that?

SL: C-A-D-O-A—Catholic Association for the Daughters of America, or something like that. And the local high school and sororities and fraternities would have dances there, and we would have a black orchestra called Bubby Johnson.

MF: A what?

SL: A black orchestra. It was Bubby Johnson. And Harry went to Hopkins and Hopkins had marvelous—

MF: Did you say Bubby Johnson?

SL: Bubby Johnson.

MF: B-u-b-b-e?

SL: B-u-b-b-y is how I think of it.

MF: Okay. What kind of music?

SL: You know, of the day. Music of the day.

MF: Jazz and swing and—

SL: Swing and you did the Lindy hop and the Charleston. No, the Charleston was a little before our time.

MF: Lindy—

SL: Yeah.

MF: So, Harry went to Hopkins.

SL: Harry went to Hopkins and Hopkins had wonderful cotillions. They brought in, you know, like, Glen Gray and his Castleoma Orchestra, and Benny Goodman.

MF: And his Castleoma?

SL: Castleoma, yeah.

MF: Benny Goodman?

SL: Yeah.

MF: And what was Harry studying in school?

SL: Harry was in—Harry had some poor advice. Harry wanted to go on to med school and their physician suggested that Harry apply to Hopkins. Well, that wasn't a bad idea, except for the time they took in a limited number of Jewish students. And Hopkins should not have been the only place that he applied. He should have applied to Maryland also, which is not what he did, and he was not accepted at Hopkins. And he wanted to go to Columbia and get a master's degree and reapply but his mother didn't want him to go out of town. So instead, they had a piece of property on Monument Street—his mother had a piece of property on Monument Street and Harry went there to open a dress shop. And while he was there it occurred to him that it was also good to bring in wedding gowns. And that's what he did and—

MF: What years was that when they started the store?

SL: When he opened the store? I guess '37.

MF: And what was it called?

SL: Sonia's Bridal Shop. As a matter of fact, I said to Dana, "The gratifying thing about it is that we can't walk down the street without somebody stopping us and telling us, 'Where are you now when we need you?'" So everyday that we went someplace somebody came over to the table and says, "You don't remember me, but I got my wedding gown from you." I said, "See, what'd I

tell you, Dana Lee?" Anyhow, we had 48 years, I believe, is what it was. And I can see the nurses from Johns Hopkins. They used to walk down the street and come up to the window and say, "That's it. That's the wedding gown I'm going to buy." You know, whatever it was.

MF: Where was it located?

SL: On Monument Street. You have any idea where that is? You know where Johns Hopkins Hospital was? Well, part of it was on Monument Street; part of it was on—the entrance that you would probably think of was on Broadway. Have you ever been in that hospital? In the entrance on Broadway—I just read this the other day—there is a statue of Jesus. How many people have found solace in, you know, just going in there—a big—it's a really big statue.

MF: Selma, when did you all marry?

SL: In 19—January, 1940.

MF: So, tell me about your marriage—about your wedding.

SL: We had—we're going back to—we had a big wedding.

MF: Where was it at?

SL: It was at—why can't I think of the name of it? I'll tell it to you in minute.

MF: Okay.

SL: It'll come to me. And we had—I might have a picture. We had bridesmaids and ushers and we had a rabbi who came an hour and half late. And when Harry got up to him he said, "This is a real Jewish wedding, an hour and a half late." And Rabbi Rosenblatt didn't talk to him for about 20 years afterwards.  
[chuckles]

MF: Was he from here?

SL: Yeah, he was a very pompous—Rabbi Rosenblatt.

MF: So, what? There was the ceremony?

SL: Yeah.

MF: And then what happened afterwards?

SL: A big dinner and was catered by somebody named Berlin, and, let's see, they had all those things I told you—gefilte fish, and chopped liver, and chicken soup with noodles, and chicken and potatoes, and knishes and you name it; they had it.

MF: Did you have a wedding cake?

SL: A big wedding cake and, see, in those days it was customary—if you couldn't invite all your friends, you invited them to the dessert part. Okay? You won't believe this. I have to tell you this. That whole thing I told you was a \$1.75 a person. Do you believe that? Anyhow, and then afterwards had—it was like a fountain in the middle of a table and drinks came out of that. Well, of course, you had drink—oh, I do want to tell you that the drinks—there was a bottle of whiskey at each table. See, they didn't have a bar but we did have a beautiful orchestra. As a matter of fact, I had a cousin who played in the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra and he was one of the musicians. And they walked around the dining room and played violins. You know, a regular—a regulation Jewish wedding. [gets photo album] Whoops!

MF: Oh, wow! That is a fancy wedding.

SL: That's it.

MF: Describe for me what everybody's in, what they're wearing.

SL: Okay, I'm wearing a white satin gown, re-embroidered in beads.

MF: What about the men?

SL: The men were wearing tuxedos.

MF: Oh!

SL: They may have been wearing tails.

MF: Yes.

SL: They were. They were wearing tails. And this is my sister, Anne, and this is her son—

MF: Oh.

SL: —who was—and this was my very dear friend, Hilda, and Tillie. And this is my sister, Belle. She was the matron of honor. She was the maid of honor.

MF: Belle was the matron of honor?

SL: Anne was the matron of honor. Belle got married a couple of months after we did.

MF: So, how many bridesmaids altogether?

SL: Four bridesmaids—one, two, three, four. She was the maid; this was the matron.

MF: Right.

SL: And they wore—the maids wore turquoise satin gowns and you could see their headpieces. They did; they [the men] wore tails.

MF: Wonderful. And did you go away for—

SL: We went away and we got as far—we were on our way to Florida and we got as far as Columbia—

MF: South Carolina?

SL: —South Carolina. And Harry didn't feel good and I was scared and I said, "Let's go home." So we went home. We put the car on a train and we came home and then got the car. And this is Harry's mother and this is Dana and Jeffrey.

MF: Those are great.

SL: On the Boardwalk in Atlantic City.

MF: And Harry's mother's name?

SL: Sonia. She was a very beautiful woman. And this is—

MF: What were Harry's parents' names—Sonia and—

SL: Oh, don't tell me that. Wait a minute. It'll be a minute.

MF: It'll come.

SL: Joseph.

MF: Sonia and Joseph.

SL: Right. This is Dana Lee.

MF: Oh, beautiful!

SL: On her wedding day. And this—

MF: Wonderful!



SL: This is us and this is—where's Marty? This is Marty's father and this is Marty's mother, and Harry and I. We didn't let Marty in the picture. [chuckles] And that is my mother on Dana's wedding day.

MF: So beautiful!

SL: Mama was—Dana Lee was her—actually her first grandchild.

MF: When did Dana Lee get married?

SL: She got married. Here. It'll tell you right here. What does it say?

MF: 1961.

SL: Right.

MF: At Beth El.

SL: Right.

MF: And she married—

SL: Marty Kline.

MF: Marty Kline.

SL: Right.

MF: K-I-I-n-e.

SL: And Dana was a junior in college when she got married.

MF: Where was she going to school?

SL: Here, University of Maryland. I told her, "You're not going out of town because you're not meeting a boy from out of town." So she came home with him one night and then—they had been on—you know, she had—oh, I know. They had open house at College Park and Marty came out there, and he brought her home—whatever it was. And then Christmas she said she got a letter from Marty, from Florida. So I said, "That's nice." But that didn't shake me up because a lot of kids went to Florida. So she said, "I don't think you understand, Mom."

[end of side 2, tape 1]

SL: But they needed my help. I mean, you know—

MF: Wait. Wait. One sec.

SL: I'm [unclear] for wait—

MF: So, what was it like to try to balance [several words unclear]—

SL: [unclear] Dana and Marty.

MF: We're doing a second tape here with Marcie Cohen Ferris and Selma Litman on July 9, 2001. We're looking at the wedding album of her daughter, Dana Lee, in 1961 when she married Marty Kline here in Baltimore. And these photographs were fantastic! Just beautiful!

SL: See, I want to just tell you. When Dana Lee was seven years old, she went to sleepover camp and Jeffrey missed her so much. It was terrible. When she came home he was like glued to her. But you can see that. He's saying, "She's leaving my life again." But this time we knew that they—well, then Marty went into the—they lived in Baltimore and she finished her junior year. And then Marty went—he was graduated and he went into the service. And they went to Augusta, Georgia and then he decided that filling and drilling wasn't his type of thing, so he went to Tufts and he became an orthodontist. And while he was there one of the professors said to him that there's a guy in New London, Connecticut, a young man who has suffered a heart attack and he needs help and he—why don't you go see him? So Dana said that the two of them rode into New London and [tachas?], a small town. It's like Westminster, you know.

MF: How do you spell [unclear]?

SL: Yeah, and so she says, "You want to live here?" So he says, "Well, let's try it for a year." So he told the guy that he did not want to become a partner. He wanted first for them to live together and see if they would be compatible. You know, whatever. So for a year he just worked for him. And they were wonderful friends and then Marty became a partner. That guy died when he was very young—very young.

MF: What was his name? Do you remember?

SL: Bob Moyel—M-o-y-e-l. Moyel.

MF: My grandfather was a dentist in New London.

SL: Really? Really? I bet you Marty would know the name.

MF: Yeah, it's Dr. Horowitz.

SL: They would know.

MF: You'll have to ask him.

SL: Oh, yeah, I will. Write it down for me.

MF: Morris Horowitz.

SL: Okay.

MF: So, tell me about what happened after the wedding. Where did you all go and settle?

SL: Well, you mean after our wedding?

MF: Your wedding.

SL: So we came back and it was so bitter cold here, and Harry and I were walking down Charles Street and he bought me a flower. And while we were walking the flower died. That's how cold it was. And he went to the doctor. Whatever it was it got straightened up. But then we got so involved in the business that it was very difficult for us to get away. I mean, he did. When Dana was born I only went to the store on occasions because I wasn't going away and leaving my baby with strangers, whatever it was.

MF: Where were you living?

SL: We lived in the house where Harry lived. His mother surprised us and made an apartment upstairs, but it was on—well, anyhow, when Dana was 13 months old we bought a house in an area called Ashburton. And we loved it. We went there—we went there at 12 o'clock at night to see it because we used to be in the store. And Harry loved it and, I'll never forget, he gave the guy a \$50 deposit. And the next time we saw the guy we bought it from was at the bank where Harry counted out the money in dollar bills. I thought I was going to die. Anyhow, whatever it was, we moved in and we loved it and we enjoyed it until Dana Lee—we lived there until she was 16 years old and the neighborhood began to—it didn't ever deteriorate. But one person sold a

house and whatever, people began to panic. See, we went out and we bought a lot and we built a house off of Stevenson Road. But she didn't live there long because, as I said, she got married. She was still 20 years old. She was 21 in June. So then they moved to Augusta, Georgia and the school there was not acceptable. Something—University of Maryland would not accept the credits from there. So Dana's major was social work. So she got a job down there, the only job she ever had, and she used to go to see these people and they had such sad stories that she would give them money. Marty said to her, "Quit the job. I can't afford you." [laughs] You know, whatever the hell the thing was.

MF: So—

SL: But then she came back to University of Maryland and she got her degree from them. And then when they moved to Connecticut she went to University of Connecticut and got her master's degree there in social work.

MF: Let me skip back a little bit to early—

SL: Go ahead.

MF: What was your pregnancy like with her?

SL: It was—everything was perfect. You will not believe how perfect it was and everyday I prayed it would be a little girl because I would never be able to take care of a little boy. So the day that she was born I called the doctor and I called him, you know. He said, "That's impossible, Selma. I just saw you the other day and you're not ready to deliver, but call me later." Well, I thought, 'I'm not going to call him and go there and find out,' so I just didn't call him. And I think I ate a whole watermelon that day. [chuckles] And then my water broke and then I knew I had to call him. So I called him. Well, all I'm going to tell you is I got to Sinai at six o'clock and she was here at ten minutes after seven.

MF: Wow! Incredible!

SL: Isn't that something? And she only weighed four pounds—tiny little—beautiful little baby. And they would not bring her upstairs to me. They didn't

have room in maternity, so I was on the fourth floor. And they wouldn't bring her up to me because she was a preemie and they wanted, you know—so I got hysterical because the nurse came from the Health Department and wanted to know what we were going to name her. And I said, "I'm not sure. We haven't decided whether it'll be Dana or Dava." "Well, I have to know." I said, "Well, I'll tell you." And as she walked out I began to believe that Dana Lee was no longer alive because it was like they needed immediately, and I didn't know why they—anyhow, I got hysterical. And I started bleeding and they sent for the obstetrician. He came in the room. He called up downstairs and he says, "Bring that baby up the back steps now." So the nurse did. She laid her down on the bed, opened the blanket. She says, "Look, 10 fingers and 10 toes." Anyhow, she did—I was scared. But in those days they kept you in bed for two weeks and when you got up you fell over in a heap. I mean, you didn't—you know, whatever it was. And she was the best kind of baby a new mother could have. You put her to bed, she went to sleep. You picked her up, she ate. She was wonderful. And she hated the bottle. She had to work too hard and she would perspire and the little hair would stick to her head. Anyhow, when she was about six months old I said, "I'm going to give her"—they didn't have anything but a plain cup. "I'm going to give her a cup," and she handled the cup and she drank out of it, and she did everything the way you would want a child to adjust.

MF: So how did you combine motherhood—

SL: Oh, well, so what I want to tell you—see, until she was born I went to the store like everyday. Now, after she was born I would only go on state occasions, if they really needed me. You know, whatever it was. And my mother would come and stay with her because I just didn't want to leave her with people I didn't know who they were or what they were or whatever. She had a marvelous rapport with my mother. She used to sit—Baba used to come and Baba brought her a present. It's a streetcar transfer. And she thought that was a marvelous present.

MF: So did you call her Baba?

SL: She—that's what Dana Lee called her.

MF: B-a-b-a?

SL: Uh-huh.

MF: And so when did you start going back to work more fulltime?

SL: To the store? Not really until after Jeffrey was born. Now, she, I told you was four and a half years older than Jeffy, and—

MF: He was born when?

SL: He was born in December of '45.

MF: Was that a good pregnancy, too?

SL: Was just a perfect pregnancy and—but after Jeffrey was born is when they tested you for Rh-negative. And so when I went back for the six-month—six week checkup Dr. Gutmacher, who was my obstetrician at that time said, "Selma, you have a perfect family. You have a little girl and you have a little boy and I wouldn't suggest that you have any more children." It turned out that Dana Lee was the one who was Rh-negative. They found that out later, you know. And—but she has three boys and everything, which I—see, they—

MF: What is that?

SL: It's a—I don't know exactly what it is but they feel that the third child sometimes has to be completely transfused, whatever it is, you know.

MF: So you had two children.

SL: And I was satisfied. I had a girl and a boy. And, like I said, I prayed—when I opened my eyes and they said it was a little girl I said, "I hope Harry's not disappointed." But then when Jeffrey was born he too weighed four pounds. But they didn't tell me in those days that it's possible if you smoke—and I was a heavy smoker—possible if you smoked—well, I think they didn't know that you get out a premature child.

MF: Did Harry want you to be at home?

SL: No.

MF: Did you have—

SL: We had no arguments. He wanted me in the store but not against my will, you know?

MF: Tell me about being in the store, what that was like for you.

SL: Well—

MF: Because you had decided—you hadn't gone to college. You went right into the store after marriage, right?

SL: Well, no, I went to work. I worked at a sale jewelry—I got a job. I told you I went to the union and then I went to a—I had a terrible experience. After I went to the union—and I never told anybody about this until very recently—I went to a prominent attorney in town. And he got a little—and I ran out of the office. I went to—there was a—in the building that he was in, there was a library and I happened to know that. And I went into the library.

MF: You were going to work for him?

SL: Well, that's what I went there for, to apply for a job and I could see that I wasn't going to work for him.

MF: Because he—

SL: [unclear]. He became too aggressive.

MF: Right.

SL: And in those days—well, I don't know what happens today but I know that young ladies are maybe equally as aggressive as the young men. I mean, I don't know that, except what I hear. Anyhow, I ran into the library and I said to her, "I've just had a bad experience and just help me get out of this building." And she did. Whatever—she locked the library and took me downstairs and I left.

MF: So you—he didn't do anything—

SL: No.

MF: —to you.

SL: Oh, I got up and walked out. And I'm telling you, I knew there was a library there.

MF: And so then, what was your—your next job was—

SL: And then I went to a place called—it was a wholesale jewelry house. And I got a job there and I have to tell you that it was a really big—it was like the whole floor—the whole second floor of the building. And there were many people who worked there. On this one occasion—and I had the front office that was by itself that I greeted people when they walked in and directed them to the person they wanted to go to. So this one day—and I had a phone in my little office. And why I was in the office late by myself I can't tell you. Maybe I had something I had to finish. And then I went into the back and the boss came back there, started that same kind of thing. I ran out of there and I came back the next day and I said to him, "I going to tell you something. You ever do anything like that again, I'm going to tell everybody." He said, "Nobody will believe you." I said, "Trust me. They'll believe me, so don't start that again. Don't ever expect me to come in your office for dictation. You got something you want me to write, call me on the phone and I'll do it." Anyhow, I worked there until we got married. And that guy when we got married told me to go out and buy a set of china, anything I wanted for a wedding present. And, shortly after we got married, there was a salesman who worked for them who—I did what was known as perpetual inventory on the salesmen's things—you know. And this guy was selling stuff out of his inventory and keeping the money. And nobody else really knew how to do it, so they called me up and asked me if I would come back, and I did come back for a couple weeks and get it straightened out. And—but I was still going to the store at night.

MF: What—how long was the store open? What time did it open in the morning?

SL: It opened at—I want to say nine o'clock—nine o'clock.

MF: And closed it at—

SL: And—well, you closed at nine o'clock, but you never got out of there at nine o'clock because a customer would come in at eight o'clock. And a bridal party takes a lot more time than an hour. And I'm going to tell you how tired I was of this store in the end. I'd see them open the door at eight o'clock, I'd



say, "Why the hell don't you come here tomorrow?" [chuckles] Anyhow, whatever it was. But, as I say, we had beautiful merchandise, the best in town, wonderful alteration department and people couldn't help but want to come to us.

MF: Well, how did you learn to be a salesperson?

SL: I don't think I was ever a salesperson. I presented the merchandise—first of all, I want to tell you something. When a girl came in in the first—in the beginning years it was mostly a Christian group that came—Czechoslovakian, Polish people. And they used to come in and they came in in the evening because they worked all day. They'd bring this girl in. She didn't have one thing to say about anything. I would take her in the dressing room and put on a bra and a slip and give her a pair of shoes and then I'd go pick out a wedding gown and put it on her and bring her out. And you tried on two, three wedding gowns until the maven—they always brought a maven with—"That's it." The girl never had a word to say about the wedding gown. And many of them wanted us to come to the wedding, and on occasions we did. And also, Harry did a commercial on Sunday on the radio. We used to go down there and do that on Sunday. So a lot of their weddings were on Sunday. And so, many times we had a really good excuse. But whatever it was, that was how you sold a wedding gown. You didn't let a girl go in—that was how we sold the wedding gown. But when you put on the proper underwear and you put on the gown you had it made. It wasn't until after Dana's wedding that we got a big influx of Jewish trade.

MF: Why was that?

SL: When?

MF: Why?

SL: Well, because they saw her wedding. Right? And it was beautiful.

MF: Now, would you go to buying trips?

SL: No, Harry did. Harry used to go. I would go with him sometimes, you know. I want to show you a picture. First, my mother-in-law went and I have a

picture of me and her in New York when we went to get my wedding dress.  
I'm going to show you that picture.

MF: Did you sell other types of clothing, too?

SL: We sold going away outfits. And after a girl bought a wedding gown she bought the bridesmaids—always bought the bridesmaids gowns. Both mothers bought their gowns and I can use a name that you would even know, maybe. Rose Taft was our biggest—you know. And—

MF: What was she?

SL: Mother's dresses. Oh, well—well, first of all, we handled the best there was. We had nothing but the best in that store and one time when—

MF: So it would be the—all the bridal party plus going away outfits.

SL: And the going away outfit.

MF: But now, you didn't carry everyday wear.

SL: Oh, no.

MF: It was just a bridal.

SL: No, no. Well, I mean, people came in for—I guess we had some dresses, you know.

MF: Right, for dances or for—

SL: Yeah. Oh, yeah. Proms. Proms were a big thing in those days. Prom—and the thing that everybody remembers most, Harry—after the girl chose the prom gown or the bridal gown or whatever gown it was, step up on a platform and Harry would get the scissors. We didn't pin up a hem. We cut the hem. He bent down and he cut—and in those days prom gowns might have five or six tulle skirts. He'd cut the hem. We did not charge for alterations. Today if they put a seam in it it's \$103.

MF: How many staff worked in the store?

SL: We had two seamstresses and—

MF: White? African American?

SL: No, no.

MF: White?

SL: We had one African American girl—no, actually two. Two.

MF: What did they do?

SL: They—after awhile they waited on—but actually what they did was when I picked out the wedding gown Cookie would put it on or Robin, because they were not acceptable in—but I tell you one thing, they had riots and they didn't touch Sonia's Bridal Shop. It was the only store on the street they didn't touch because we didn't ever give them a hard time. They came in. We treated them like human beings because—

MF: So you sold to some black clientele?

SL: I can't say that we sold it to them but we let them come in—we didn't give them a hard time. And we had two girls—black girls who worked in there who—as a matter of fact, we had a building on Monument Street that was rented for "The Color Purple." And the two girls who worked in the—you know, what's her name?

MF: Oprah?

SL: Not Oprah. Goldberg. What's her first name? Whoopi. Whoopi Goldberg. And the two black girls who worked in the store were also in that thing. They rented that store and did—that was where the thing took place. And as a matter of fact, there's a sign says "Sonia's Bridal Shop," because it was like two doors away and you could see it.

MF: It sounds like you really—really, the business was your love.

SL: Well, I didn't love it, but I enjoyed the prestige that it brought, you know. I enjoyed that.

MF: Yeah, what was—

SL: No, I felt that my children were more important.

MF: What was the most difficult part of the store? What was the biggest challenge? I mean, was it difficult—

SL: I'm going to tell you the truth. Do you know, I started out by telling you—I believed that I always—I always believed that I could accomplish whatever was necessary to—and I always believed that. I did, which was a blessing. I

don't know where it came from but ever—whatever it was it was a blessing. It was good to feel that way about yourself.

MF: So you didn't—you found that you could get through what needed to be—

SL: Yes. Yeah.

MF: Was it difficult working with family at times?

SL: Never—well, I mean, my mother-in-law would say, "Why didn't she buy the wedding gown? You should have called me." You know, let me—I have to be honest. You know.

MF: Yeah.

SL: And she was a beautiful woman who was equally as self-confident as I. All right?

MF: Yeah, both strong women?

SL: Right.

MF: Right.

SL: Right.

MF: So tell me about how—were you involved in Jewish activity or—

SL: Well, the truth of the matter is, I was remembering today that Hadassah had a program that prepared you—you know, whatever it was. But I found that I was more involved with the store, and I didn't have too much time. The time that I had away from the store I wanted to spend with my children, not in being a president of Hadassah.

MF: Right, right. Were you all associated with the shul or—

SL: Oh, yeah. We belonged to—we belonged to Beth El. When Dana started Hebrew School Beth El was not built yet—the one in Baltimore. And so she went to Beth Tfiloh. Now, Beth Tfiloh was—you were not able to get a seat in shul because they were all occupied or whatever it was. So we used to go there. It wasn't to my liking but we went there. And then when they built Beth El we brought Dana Lee to Beth El, and in those days you bought a seat in shul. And I guess we started going to Beth El as soon as they built this synagogue around—first of all, in those days I walked to shul. So they built

Beth El—we lived like a block and a half away or two blocks away from the synagogue.

MF: When was it built?

SL: I'm trying to think.

MF: Just generally.

SL: I think—I have to think a minute.

MF: Was that where Dana Lee was married?

SL: But not in the one that was built at that time. Yes, she was married at Beth El but that's off of Park Heights Avenue now. At that time—like I said, that the neighborhood changed and there was an exodus.

MF: Yeah.

SL: Everybody start running.

MF: Yeah. What was happening to the neighborhood?

SL: We weren't there long enough to see anything happen. And I don't really think anything happened. As a matter of fact—

MF: Well, who—just who—

SL: —when Jeffy—when Jeffy was about 16 years old he loved that house. He went there, rang the bell and said to the lady, "I used to live here and can I go upstairs and see my bedroom?" She said, "Sure."

MF: But you saw a transition to black folks moving in?

SL: Yeah.

MF: Right?

SL: Well, I mean, it had just started. When we left maybe there were two homes that were sold in the area, but then everybody started to.

MF: So, did you ever experience—I mean, because I know in Baltimore it really was an issue in some neighborhoods—you know—

SL: No, I never experienced—

MF: Any anti-Semitic—

SL: —any problem. I truly—as a matter of fact, the area that we bought that house in, Ashburton, was restricted at one point in time.

MF: And what about country clubs and—were you members—

SL: Well, let me tell you something. People talk about restrictions, but the country clubs that were started by German Jews did not admit Russian Jews, so I don't know what the hell they're complaining about.

MF: Right. Were you all—was that part of your social life?

SL: Not until much later in life because first of all, Harry was in the store day and night. I'm telling you. He would come home 11 o'clock at night. I would pick Dana Lee up. We would play with her and then we lay her back in bed and she'd go to sleep. She—when I tell you she was a perfect child for new parents.

MF: And what would you do for supper and meals?

SL: Well, let me tell you, we ate them in Nate's and Leon's. [chuckles] When they got older—I had a girl who came to me when Jeffrey was born and was with us for 38 years. Then she had the poor sense to run for a bus and it was on a Shabbos and they were running for to get home on time, and that was the end of Mary.

MF: Was she—

SL: Black.

MF: Black lady. What was her name?

SL: Mary. And she thought that Jeffrey was her son and she just adored him. I remember she used to put him outside in the carriage and then she'd run outside. She'd say—I'd say, "What's the matter, Mary?" "There's a man walking down the street." You know. I didn't have those fears in those days, but she did.

MF: She worked for you—

SL: Thirty-eight years.

MF: Now, what did she help you do?

SL: Well, that's what I want to tell you.

MF: Do you know her last name?

SL: I'll think about it in a minute.

MF: Okay.

SL: Harry will remember it.

MF: Okay.

SL: Mary Saunders—S-a-u-n-d-e-r-s.

MF: Okay.

SL: She used to stay and do the—on Friday night, I told you, I had the immediate world. I—on Thursday night—

MF: How many did that include usually?

SL: Well, that was—that was about 12 or 13 people every Friday night. So, one Friday I said to Mary, “Nobody’s coming for Thursday.” I said it to her [unclear]. I said, “Nobody’s coming for dinner, just Honey and Jeff, so you don’t need to stay; you can go home.” So I was walking in the house. Oh, on Friday night I used to go and help Mama with dinner on—that was my night that I went there and helped her with dinner. So I was walking in the house and I said, “Have a good evening.” She said, “Are you sure? Are you sure you don’t want me to stay?” I said, “I’m positive, Mary. Go home.” So she went downstairs and, as I understand it, about two hours later I got a phone call and he said—when Harry came home for dinner that night, he didn’t say it, but there was an ambulance outside. He didn’t go over to see who was in the ambulance. He just came upstairs. So like about two hours afterwards the guy from the lobby called, and he said something about Mary. I said, “No, that wasn’t Mary. Mary left here two”—he says, “It’s two hours ago that I’m talking about.” But he didn’t know what had happened to her. So Harry called the local hospitals. They didn’t have anybody by that name. So then I said to him, “Call Shock Trauma.” He said, “What for?” I said, “I don’t know. Just call Shock Trauma.” So he called and someone came to the phone and he asked about Mary Saunders, and they said, “Just a minute.” And somebody else came to the phone and said, “We can only give that information to family.” So Harry says, “Let me tell you something. She’s family. She’s been with us for 38 years.” She had just died and they did not

know where to locate her family, so her husband had heart trouble. So I said to him, "Tell them, be gentle, because"—so they went down and they found him and they told him. But that was what it was.

MF: So what would she do in your household?

SL: Mary—everything. She came in the morning. She did the—I—just the other day I told Dana Lee, "When we lived on Ellamont Road she washed every window in that house every Friday and in those days we had Venetian blinds and you had to, you know, clean the Venetian blind. She did not cook except when I went away to—went to the store. She worked Wednesday—Monday, Wednesday and Friday, I guess.

MF: So she'd cook when you were gone?

SL: That's what I want to tell you. She made them—they couldn't wait until I got out of the house because she made them lamb chops and mashed potatoes. That was her meal for them on the nights I wasn't at home. But I used to come home from—

MF: But she knew how to follow the kashrut?

SL: She did everything—she told me how to do it. I'll tell you what she did. When Jeffy was a little boy he had a lot of upper respiratory problems and in those days they did it. You took them to the hospital and they did the adenoids—not the tonsils, just the adenoids. And Dana Lee went to school on a bus, and on this particular day it was raining and the child in back of her was in a hurry and pushed her or whatever. Dana fell down and dislocated her shoulder blade. Mary brought her in the house, did not take her clothes off, laid her down in bed, called the pediatrician, and that was a [unclear] because if she'd tried to move her she could have made a whole big problem—so she knew—she knew how to do everything. She did.

MF: Yeah.

SL: And she did love my children; she really did.

MF: Did she have her own children?

SL: No.



MF: Oh.

SL: No, she didn't.

MF: Wow. So she could—did she ever cook southern type things?

SL: No. That's all she made. No, well, but see, I do want to say that before she came to work for me she worked for a hospital. I don't know what she did there but—yeah, I guess a nurse's aid or something.

MF: So would you occasionally come home and cook supper?

SL: Well, are you—no, when I was at the store we stopped and got something to eat and then we came home. And Mary would sleep over on the nights that she stayed late, you know. And—

MF: And then, when you did the Sabbath, you did Friday night Shabbat and then what was—

SL: Many times I came home on Thursday night at 11 o'clock and started the cooking, or Pesach, I would come home—Mary would help me with the—not the cooking but, you know, changing dishes and cleaning the oven and the refrigerator and the—and she did everything. She did—ironed. You never saw clothes. I still have some clothes that Mary ironed, I wouldn't use. [chuckles] I wouldn't use them.

MF: Selma, what did you do for the next day? For Saturday? Did you—

SL: Well, on Saturday Dana Lee had—when she was like in the fifth grade a young lady entered her class, and she came home one day and she said, "There's a new girl in my class and she's very lonesome. Can she come home to sleep over Friday night?" I said, "Sure." So she came—and that—from then on she came every Friday night and on Saturday morning I would take them down—I would drive downtown, drop them off and they would go to the movies and lunch. And then they would take a bus and come to the store and I would bring them home with me. Now, I'd pick up Jeffrey and we'd go out and have something to eat on Saturday.

MF: On Saturday evening?

SL: You know, for dinner. And—

MF: What did you do on Sundays?

SL: On Sunday we took our children out to dinner all the time—every Sunday.

MF: At noon or—

SL: No, dinnertime. No. No.

MF: Where would you go?

SL: We would go to the Chesapeake, Pimlico. I just asked Dana the other day what was her favorite. Miller Brothers.

MF: Now, did you all eat any forbidden food?

SL: Pardon me?

MF: Did you eat—

SL: No. Oh, I—yes, of course we did.

MF: When you were—

SL: No.

MF: —out?

SL: Well, see—yeah, well, Dana loved shrimp. Loved shrimp and Jeffrey, we found out, was allergic to it. If he ate the shrimp he blew up like a balloon. So I used to say to her, “Dana, I’ll take you out and you get shrimp if you want it but don’t order it when”—she wouldn’t. She really wouldn’t. But he would order a lobster. The little pisher. He would order a lobster.

MF: But you wouldn’t have it in the house?

SL: No. I mean, that’s still true today.

MF: What about crabs?

SL: Loved them. We used to go to a place called Gordon’s Crabs. But, you know, Dana Lee had something that upset her a couple years ago, and she swore she would not eat any of those things.

MF: What—would you take vacations?

SL: Always with the children. Well, first of all, Dana and Jeffrey both went to summer camp.

MF: Where’d they go?

SL: They would go to Camp Ramblewood and Dana went on to be a counselor there and Jeffrey did, too.

MF: Where was that?

SL: In Ramblewood in Darlington, Maryland.

MF: Jewish?

SL: Jewish. As a matter of fact, a lot of people from Washington went to that camp because Irv and Claire lived in Washington. They were one of the director—they were two of the—and the other director lived in Baltimore.

MF: And what about other summer vacations? What kind of things would you—

SL: Wherever—we would go—after camp was over we would go to Canada, Buffalo, Detroit. We had friends in Detroit and—

MF: Did you all do beach vacations?

SL: We would do that, like, weekends to Atlantic City. Not Ocean City—Atlantic City.

MF: Were there certain times of year that the business dictated that you could take a vacation?

SL: Yes, yes. You didn't—you didn't go away, like, from February to July. That was—you know, February they'd start buying their gowns, and that was definitely the season. And—

MF: Tell me what happened to the business eventually.

SL: What happened to the business? We sold the building and then rented it—rented it—sold the building.

MF: When?

SL: We just closed out the stock and sold the building.

MF: When was that?

SL: I think it was 11 years ago.

MF: Why did you decide to sell?

SL: We were too old to—but because when I saw them open the door to come in to buy and I didn't want them there, I knew it was time to go. It wasn't going to be any good to be there.

MF: Were you always in the same location?

SL: Yes.

MF: Wow! And did you find that the wedding business was changing?

SL: No, but everybody said that we got out just in time. Everybody said that, but that's why we got out. We—I mean, we were past the age of retirement. We truly were. But we stayed there, you know, year after year—whatever it was.

MF: When did you move here?

SL: We moved here right after we got rid of the store, so I think we're here about—

[end of side 1, tape 2]

SL: I think maybe it's—

MF: Like, you probably moved here about 1990? Closed the store about 19—

SL: I'll ask Harry exactly when it was. We moved here on his birthday. I'll tell you about here. We went to another building after we sold the house. The children were gone; the house was empty. It was a big house and I just didn't want to stay there anymore. So we sold the house and we rented an apartment. And I loved the apartment but the kitchen was the size of this—it was impossible—couldn't stand the kitchen. And we thought about doing things—whatever. While we were there they decided they were no longer going to rent so we had to buy it, so we bought it. So then one day I said to him, "I want you to take me past the Pavilion." He said, "I don't want to go there." I said, "Well, don't go. Just take me." So he brought me up. I said, "You want to come?"—"No, I don't want to go. I don't want to move." "Okay." So I came in and I was impressed with the entrance. And then I went out and I said to him, "They got the best elevators you ever saw. You want to come in and look at the elevators?" "All right....." So he came in and says, "It's not bad." Now, I think that it's an impressive entrance foyer. You know, whatever. Anyhow, and so we came up and we decided on this because this

has two extra closets. And we needed extra closets. Harry's got a store in his closet.

MF: And a great kitchen.

SL: Wonderful kitchen. Beautiful kitchen.

MF: Do you cook much still?

SL: I did until about three years ago, and I'm telling you I had every holiday and my brother's wife—my brother's wife used to say to me, "We're down to one table, Selma. I remember when we had three tables." But I put up three tables in here for holidays.

MF: Which holidays would you do?

SL: All of them. Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kipper, Pesach, Thanksgiving. Every one.

MF: So you did a big dinner the evening before—evening of?

SL: Evening before. Well, Rosh Hashanah was the evening before and the afternoon after shul on Rosh Hashanah.

MF: What kind of things would you do usually?

SL: What did I serve?

MF: Yeah.

SL: You want to know what's really funny? I have a list of everything I made for almost every holiday. I took—it's put away with the Pesach things. I'm not going to get it. But I took it with me and I showed Dana Lee—oh, and what day to make it, you know, before and preparation. I guess turkey and veal and brisket—you know, I would alternate whatever it was. And I never served soup when it was a lot of people because soup is a difficult thing. And I would, like, start with a salad for a whole lot of people, and Baba's cholesterol balls that David remembers well.

MF: Did you do things like [unclear] or kugels or those?

SL: Well, a kugel. Yeah. Now, and also my mother made a rice pudding. Meat—rice pudding. Also with schmaltz. Whatever she made it was with schmaltz. And I found out that chicken soup does the same job. I mean, you know, you

make matzo balls with chicken soup instead of with water you've got good matzo balls.

MF: Yeah. Well, tell me about Jeffrey, what he does.

SL: He went to law school. Is that what you're asking?

MF: Mm-hmm.

SL: He graduated from law school.

MF: Where did he go?

SL: He went to University of Maryland at College Park. He went to—then he decided that he wanted to work, so he took a job in a car dealership and he then decided—you know, I bugged him to go to law school, so he went at night to the University of Baltimore. And then he's in the real estate business. He found that law was not his whatever.

MF: Does he live here?

SL: He lives in Baltimore.

MF: And do you have grandchildren?

SL: He has two children who are not married, a daughter, 30, and a daughter, 27. [goes to get photograph] This is Honey and Jeff and Harry and I in Israel, and I think Honey told me that that was about eight or ten years ago. This is my mother and father and their children and their children's children.

MF: That's wonderful.

SL: And this is Honey and Jeff and Harry and I in Israel.

MF: Where's Honey from?

SL: Honey is from Baltimore. Her father was the number one caterer in the state of Maryland, Bluefeld. I don't know if it's a name you—

MF: Yeah.

SL: —familiar with or not.

MF: Ya. So that was her last name?

SL: Bluefeld.

MF: And what are your grandchildren's names?

SL: My granddaughters, Wendy and Erika. I'm going to show them to you.

MF: Is it Erika—E-r-i—  
SL: E-r-i-k-a. [goes to get more photos.] This is Wendy and Erika in Israel.  
MF: Oh, they're beautiful.  
SL: This is Wendy. They are—and Erika.  
MF: What do they do now?  
SL: Oh, Wendy works as a psychologist and Erika—I have to find out. And this is my brother's son, David, in the middle here. He's the one who wants Baba's cholesterol balls.  
MF: Yeah. [chuckles] So did you ever write down recipes for all these—  
SL: Oh, yeah. Of course. I'm going to show it to you.  
MF: So you've seen a lot of generations of women in your family.  
SL: Right.  
MF: What do you think about what your granddaughters are doing today?  
SL: I think it's wonderful if they're happy, and they're happy and that's all that matters to me.  
MF: Do they have family, Selma?  
SL: They're not married. Oh—  
MF: Can I help you with something?  
SL: No, I want to see if I can get this.  
MF: Oh, let me get it for you.  
SL: No, I have to reach and I have to set it down. Maybe you could come over and—and then I don't have to reach in.  
MF: Wow! What is this?  
SL: This is a—see, look. Wait one minute. See, there's the recipe.  
MF: Oh! That's for the pir—  
SL: Piroshkis, right.  
MF: Wow, that is [unclear]. Wow! Okay, I've got to take a picture of that.  
SL: Okay.  
MF: So, can you read how to spell that to me?  
SL: Let me bring it over here.

MF: I'll get it.

SL: Wait a minute. My eyesight's not all that good.

MF: So are those the cholesterol balls?

SL: No.

MF: Okay.

SL: I'm looking for the—

MF: These are the dough with the cheese.

SL: With the cheese, right. Well, what does it say? One and a half—

MF: How do you spell it?

SL: P-i-e-r—let me see something a minute. "Kosher Cooking." [pause while she gets things...] First of all, I want to tell you—anyway, it's not even here—that this cookbook was written by a Jewish lady. This was the Jewish—this was a young—

MF: Oh, yeah.

SL: —person's bible.

MF: Right.

SL: You know.

MF: What's that called?

SL: *Settlement Cookbook*. I think—I'll take that back.

MF: Let me get a picture of you right next to this.

SL: Okay.

MF: And I think we need it with your pot.

SL: Yeah, get my pot. Get Baba's pot. We got it okay?

MF: We got it. Okay, you look at me. Let me get one more. You look great. Now, I'll do a close up of [several words unclear]. It's just a whole lot better when you've got a person. Pots just aren't that exciting all alone. Okay, smile a little.

SL: [unclear]. Baba's pot.

MF: Got it.

SL: Now, let's see if they've got piroshkis in here.



MF: You know, I—yeah, because sometimes they’re called like pieroshkes, right?

SL: Well, that’s the same thing.

MF: Same thing.

SL: But I’m just saying pirisgees—

MF: Right.

SL: —as in my mother’s [unclear].

MF: And everybody spelled it different.

SL: Right.

MF: What would it be under? Are you going to look in the—

SL: Oh, yeah.

MF: Her index is in the front. Here it is—pierogis.

SL: Yeah. That’s pierogi, or [unclear]. What is this?

MF: Pigeons.

SL: Pigeons?

MF: Potted pigeons.

SL: Who the hell made that?

MF: No.

SL: [unclear] O, S. [unclear] “The Kosher Trilogy—Jewish Cooking in America.”  
I’ve got [unclear]. You got it down. God Bless America! Let me see. Let me  
see if the other recipe is in there.

MF: Mama’s roll up kugel. Is that right? Roll up something?

SL: Yeah, roll up kugel. This is—

MF: The green bowl of flour.

SL: [unclear], spread with schmaltz. See, I don’t call it cholesterol balls because  
David named it. [unclear] How do you like this recipe? Roll dough and add  
straight line of cheese.

MF: I love that.

SL: These fell down.

MF: These are all the ones you use all the time.

SL: Right. That’s fine; that’s fine.

MF: Okay, let's get that back further. I've got it.

SL: Got it?

MF: Yeah. Did someone give you the *Settlement Cookbook*?

SL: Sure, when I got married. You can see I used it a lot.

MF: Yeah, it's great.

SL: Everybody had a *Settlement Cookbook*. I think I bought my girls a *Settlement Cookbook*.

MF: Yeah, it's great. I'm going to take one picture of your cookbooks.

SL: Okay.

MF: I'm going to wrap this up because I know you've got to be getting tired.  
[several words unclear]. Selma, let me just get you to kind of wrap this up  
with me by telling me about your life these years in the kind of—

SL: [unclear]

MF: Let's kind of wrap this up by talking about your life these days and how you all  
spend your time and with family and those kind of things.

SL: Well, see, we waited—well, we're blessed. I'm not going to say we waited too  
long. But now that things that we would have liked to have been able to do  
we're not always able to do. So we enjoy each other and enjoy going out  
with the surviving friends. You know, see, the picture turns around. Pardon  
me. [coughs]

MF: It seems like you've had such a strong marriage.

SL: Sixty-one years of it.

MF: So what's—what makes that marriage last 61 years?

SL: I think our responsibility to each other. I believe that that's what I have to  
think of. I believe that you have to be friends, and respect each other, and  
understand that your opinion is not the only one that counts. You have to  
have a lot of understanding, and what I'm so happy about is that I also see it  
happening with our children, and that—like I've said a million times, we are  
blessed.

MF: Have you had some health challenges in the past few years?

SL: Everybody does.

MF: Yeah.

SL: But you have to say, "Thank God it came now when they can be corrected or helped," or whatever it is, you know.

MF: Have women friendships been important to you over the years?

SL: I believe that Harry and I have mostly depended on each other. Yes, we have enjoyed friendships but you find that you don't always see what is really there. Harry and I don't wait for people to need us. We see their need. We do what makes us happy. It's as simple as that. I'm not going to say we did anything for somebody. We—if it helped them we're glad, but we certainly satisfied our own needs by doing what we wanted to do to help people. I mean, that's—Harry gets—I'm not exaggerating—at least a dozen requests for contributions everyday and he's got to send everybody \$10 or whatever the hell he sends. Now, you know, I'm not that generous because the Red Cross didn't look at the Jews who needed them in World War II. So I—it doesn't stop him from sending the Red Cross money, but I have to express my opinion and that's my opinion. They didn't do one single thing for the Jews who needed them. Now, I'm not going to give them blood, but he does send them money and I can't argue with that.

MF: Did you all spend much time in other parts of the country, other than—

SL: We didn't have the time, sweetheart. We just really didn't have—we once went to Europe and we had the poor sense to call home from there. What happened was that Harry's mother went to her car and fell down and broke an arm. They took her into the hospital. They called Jeff and Jeff came, you know. While she was in the hospital she wanted to get help and they didn't come soon enough. So she got out of bed and broke the other arm. So we had the poor taste to call and get that information. And of course we turned around and came home. So we never really felt free to do the things we wanted to do. In other words, Dana Lee moved to Boston first, you know, when she left here and Marty went to Tufts, and her son was born—her first

child was born there. We would get on a plane when we closed—after many years we began to close the store at six o'clock on Saturday. We rationalized that people engaged go out and enjoy each other's company on Saturday. Anyhow, we'd get on a plane at six o'clock. Dana and Marty would pick us up at the—in Boston. We'd go out and have dinner and we would play with the children on Sunday morning and we'd come back Sunday and be here in time to open the store on Monday. So we pushed in and many times we went to New London and brought the children home with us, and Dana and Marty got to go on a little vacation. And Mary took care of them during the day and I came home at night, whatever it was. We enjoyed what we did but we didn't have a lot of time to do it.

MF: What are Dana and—what are Dana's children's names?

SL: Names? Andrew, Mitchell—here they are—and Richard. Of course, they're all grown up now. In fact, I have their wedding pictures. But here's Andy and Mitchell and Richard.

MF: Beautiful.

SL: And this is Wendy and this is Erika.

MF: Oh, they're great.

SL: Now, Andy is 36 years old. He's going—in July he's going to be 34 years old, and this one is 30 years old.

MF: Yeah.

SL: And this is the one who put that picture—that sweatshirt—that Polish shirt.

MF: Yeah.

SL: And it said, "Sixty but sexy." [chuckles]

MF: Do you think there's anything that really has made Baltimore a very distinctive kind of Jewish community in your mind?

SL: I think so.

MF: What do you think is different about Baltimore Jewish—

SL: I think that they're glued together, the Jewish community, and I think that they have more Orthodox than most Jewish communities. They have a lot of

Orthodox people here, and they enjoy life in Baltimore. They do. And they—  
if they come from New York they love it here.

MF: Is there anything else that you wanted to tell me that I haven't asked you?

SL: You've asked me everything and I've told you everything I know. See this  
right here? That's my mother's trousseau.

MF: Oh, it's wonderful!

SL: That translated into English—it's "Upon leaving my father's home." In other  
words, that's, you know—

MF: Beautiful towel.

SL: —girl getting married. Right?

MF: And then, is that Harry?

SL: That's Harry on Dana and Marty's boat. Isn't that a great picture? Everybody  
comes in here admires that.

MF: It's a great picture.

SL: He's a great guy and Harry had bypass surgery a year ago. And until then he  
played golf three days a week and, like everybody, we think it'll never end.  
One of the first—he had four bypass and his aorta valve was replaced. He  
went in knowing that he was going to feel good—because all of his life he's  
been a pessimist and I was the optimist. Now, we changed roles. So he  
opened his eyes after the surgery and the cardiologist happened to be  
standing there, and he said, "When can I play golf?" He had it done in June a  
year ago. He says, "September." Harry says, "September!" You know, he's  
getting hot under the collar. One of the first things they tell you about bypass  
surgery is depression, you know, as an aftermath. Didn't take long for it to set  
in and he had a difficult time saying he cannot do the things he—I said, "I  
want to tell you a little secret. Thank God for the things you can do. That's  
what you've got to do. You've got to thank God everyday for the things you  
can do." It didn't work exactly, you know. We kept trying. But I think about  
now, it just—and the other day I told you on Friday he had cataract on his  
right eye, and thank God we went on Friday. And the guy said that the eye is

healing fine. You know, whatever it is. But they're little setbacks. And he hasn't played—and everybody says, "How's your golf game?" "I haven't played in over a year." You know, that kind of thing. And then his good friends who played with him are not here. But, you know, it's episodes that you face in later life but you have to thank God for—we see our great grandchildren. A lot of people don't get to do that, and we're fortunate. And, plus the fact that they're glad to see us. That is a big factor; it truly is, because they can be, you know, like, "I don't care."

MF: But you've given them a lot of room.

SL: That's got nothing to do with it. That's called mazel because I want to tell you that everybody tries—look, I'm a realist. I might be a pessimist, but I'm also a realist and I know that other people have tried hard also. I'm not saying we didn't. We did. We tried hard. We tried to do the right thing and be with him when we could, but in our case, thank God, it was acceptable and it made for a good life for all of us. Now, you know, not everybody's—

End of Interview